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ABSTRACT

Community colleges have traditionally been regarded as the only segment of higher education that truly focuses on teaching and learning with instructional innovation embedded as a core institutional value. However, some colleges have lost their early innovative spirit, while others are constrained by limited economic resources and have become disconnected from the currents of innovation, making it difficult to renew their commitment to instructional innovation. It is inevitably easier to continuously review the institutional activities that support instructional innovation, focusing on how many and which faculty are currently experimenting with new techniques; mechanisms for encouraging innovation; and formal policies for incentives, rewards, and recognition. A critical mass of dedicated, energized faculty must also be maintained to sustain any commitment to innovation. To aid faculty selection efforts, colleges should review policies to verify that a statement of values regarding teaching and learning has been developed, applicants are required to demonstrate teaching effectiveness, a required staff development program is in place for new faculty, an adequate faculty evaluation system exists, and the college culture recognizes effective teachers. Finally, one of the most exciting ways to stimulate innovation is by applying current information technology to teaching. Colleges should develop long-range plans for updating technology, participate in networks of information technology users, and evaluate the effectiveness of technology in instruction. (BCY)

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SUSTAINING INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Terry O'Banion

Community colleges, from their earliest days, have been regarded as the only segment of higher education really focused on teaching and learning. Some colleges have been quite successful in this regard and have developed climates in which innovative strategies and practices are highly prized. The most notable have imbedded innovation as a core value and have successfully made the pursuit of innovation an integral part of the institution's culture. These rare cultures often have had their genesis in the visions of extraordinary presidents, but when a critical core of faculty engage in innovation, the college can survive changes in presidents and maintain an innovative spirit that undergirds teaching and learning effectiveness. The extent to which such a critical core exists is a major hallmark of a college dedicated to making teaching and learning its highest priority.

Sadly, some colleges that were highly innovative in the 60s and 70s have lost the innovative spirit today. Other colleges and their faculties, constrained by limited travel funds and a general malaise that pervades many community colleges in difficult economic times, are apt to turn inward and become disconnected from the national community of innovators that energize themselves and each other at meetings such as the annual NISOD and League conferences. As that happens, the danger is that the college's innovative core will begin to wither.

Once the core is disenchanted, considerable thought and a great deal of action are required to renew a college's innovative spirit. Far simpler, by comparison, is the task of nurturing and maintaining the college's core of innovators. A college should monitor and continuously review its state of instructional innovation, with particular attention paid to the kinds of activities that sustain and support an innovative climate. As part of an ongoing, institution-wide examination of instructional policies and practices, such a focus can even serve as a catalyst for a renaissance of instructional innovation throughout the college. Among the indicators a college should consider monitoring are:

- How many and which faculty are currently experimenting with instructional innovations?
- Is there a mechanism in the college that initiates and encourages instructional innovation? If so, are faculty connected and responsive to it?
- Does the college have formal policies and programs of incentives, rewards, and recognition to stimulate instructional innovation?

Faculty Selection and Development

Incentives, rewards, and similar programs alone, however, will not sustain a commitment to innovation; for that, the critical mass of dedicated, energized faculty must be maintained, whether through development or through new hires. Fortunately, college leaders have not had a better opportunity to revitalize the faculty since the 1960s—over half the faculty in community colleges are currently in the process of retiring. The faculty hired in the next five years will determine the real nature of community colleges for decades to come. To take full advantage of this brief window of opportunity, visionary leaders must move quickly and carefully to create value statements and processes for selecting, evaluating, developing, and rewarding both new and existing faculty, for they are the ones who will determine whether or not a college will retain (or renew) its reputation as an institution truly dedicated to teaching and learning. The following kinds of questions may prove helpful in defining that task:

- Has the college assessed the retirement patterns of current faculty over the next ten years and determined replacement needs both in terms of number and kind?
- Has the college developed a statement of values regarding teaching and learning? Have the characteristics of teachers needed to achieve these values been derived so they can be used to select replacements?
- Is there a clearly determined procedure for selecting new faculty that requires applicants to demonstrate effectiveness in teaching and that will ensure a cadre of teachers who will implement the values in the teaching and learning statement?

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- Has the college put into place a required staff development program for these new faculty that will assist them in achieving personal and professional goals derived from the values statement on teaching and learning and the desirable characteristics of teachers?
- Is the staff development program coordinated by a full-time, highly qualified staff member and integrated into the real-life activities of the college?
- Does the faculty evaluation system reflect the statement on values and characteristics of teachers and provide opportunities for faculty to take advantage of perspectives on their work from colleagues, supervisors, and students? Is assistance provided teachers in preparing evaluations and in developing new competencies and upgrading skills?
- Has the college established a culture in which the most effective teachers are recognized and rewarded in ways that are appropriate to their achievement and that also ensures respect and a sense of fair play by those not recognized and rewarded? Is good teaching genuinely celebrated at the college?

Leaders who understand the key role of the faculty in creating an institution totally dedicated to teaching and learning as its highest priority, will ensure that the selection and development of innovative faculty are carefully orchestrated activities throughout the institution. Placed in a context of real development opportunities, meaningful systems of reward and recognition for faculty serve to spark development and can make the climate of the college an attractive and challenging one in which to work.

Information Technology

The college's innovative core can be stimulated in many ways, but none is so exciting, or presents such potential for creating real change as the application of information technology to the teaching equation. Community college faculty members are the driving force behind the use of computers by students as they adapt new information technology to extend and expand their own teaching. Increasingly, technologically aware educational leaders would agree with the new president of EDUCOM, who states that technology is "the primary vehicle by which institutions of higher education are going to re-engineer the teaching-and-learning process."

Colleges must recognize that innovation requires ongoing and continuous access to new tools and the stimulation of new processes. Most community colleges have information technology systems in place for managing their administrative functions. As a college begins to assess its progress in the instructional use of technology, the following kinds of questions may prove useful:

- Has the college made a distinction between administrative and instructional computing and provided resources and appropriate organizational support to ensure the expansion of instructional computing?
- Is there a long-range plan for developing, planning, managing, and updating information technology to support effective teaching and learning?
- Does the college participate in national and international networks for users of information technology and regularly support faculty participation in conferences and workshops on information technology?
- Does the college evaluate the effectiveness of information technology in improving teaching and learning compared to other instructional approaches?
- Is the college experimenting with instructional programs using information technology that will increase teaching productivity?
- To what extent is information technology used to build community among administrators, faculty, and students at the college?

In its landmark report, *Building Communities*, the Future's Commission declared, "The community college should be the nation's premier teaching institution." The Commission could have claimed that the community college *is* the nation's premier teaching institution, but the statement was qualified with *should* instead. After decades of hyperbole about the "Teaching College," perhaps community college leaders are becoming more analytical about the primary function of teaching and learning, realizing that the goal may be different from the reality.

The goal is sound. But if the reality is ever to match the goal, then community college leaders must work to sustain the vital innovative core of their colleges, through development, through new hiring opportunities, and through a strong commitment to technology. The areas highlighted here are suggested only as beginning points for review; a starting place for colleges that want to lay claim to the title of the "nation's premier teaching institutions."

Terry O'Banion is executive director of the League for Innovation in the Community College. This article was adapted from his new book, Teaching and Learning in the Community College, which will be published by the American Association of Community Colleges in April 1994.

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Larry Johnson, editor

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